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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the results of three studies about teacher causal explanation of failure in the Brazilian public elementary schools. Confronted with very high incidence of school dropout and retention, the investigators asked public school teachers to choose the main determinants of dropout and failure in their schools. Two studies were quantitative and one was qualitative (with quantitative triangulation). These studies and two others reviewed showed impressive consistency and similarity of findings across samples, year of investigation, and method used. In general, teachers attributed the causality of school failure to factors that were external to the school; responsibility was placed on the students' lack of effort or interest, the conditions of poverty of the family, and their families' lack of involvement. Faced with generalized shared beliefs, the authors draw on S. Moscovici's theory of social representations and suggest that public school teachers may have developed their own pedagogical theory. Pedagogical and psychological theories about students, instruction, and learning may have been re-elaborated by them to come to constitute a new set of ideas and ways to understand and explain school reality. Once established, social representations guide everyday thinking and behavior and may serve the purpose of perpetuating the precarious achievement of low-income children in the Brazilian public school system. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/SLD)

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**TEACHERS' CAUSAL EXPLANATIONS FOR ACHIEVEMENT:
COMMON SENSE OR SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS?**

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA)
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Abstract

This paper analyzes the results of three studies about teacher causal explanation of failure in the Brazilian public elementary schools. Confronted with very high incidence of school dropout and retention, the investigators asked public school teachers to choose the main determinants of dropout and failure in their schools. Two studies were quantitative and one was qualitative (with quantitative triangulation). These studies and two others reviewed showed impressive consistency and similarity of findings across samples, year of investigation and method used. In general teachers attributed the causality of school failure to factors that were external to the school--- responsibility was placed on the students' lack of effort or interest, the conditions of poverty of the family and their families' lack of involvement. Faced with generalized shared beliefs the authors draw on Moscovici's theory of social representations and suggest that public school teachers may have developed their own pedagogical theory. Pedagogical and psychological theories about students, instruction and learning may have been re-elaborated by them and come to constitute a new set of ideas and ways to understand and explain school reality. Once established social representations guide everyday thinking and behavior and may serve the purpose to perpetuate the precarious achievement among low income children in the Brazilian public school system.

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Despite all of the efforts of the government, school drop-out and retention in the grade has been one of the major educational problems in Brazil in the last three decades. This problem occurs most often in the public school system and affects mostly children from low socio-economic levels. The highest rates of school failure are in the passage from first to second grade but for those who succeed to stay at school, the probability of finishing the eighth grade is still low. According to studies conducted by the National Institute of Educational Research, the performance of basic education in Brazil is still poor. Even though drop out rates have improved (students have been spending, on the average, five years in school before dropping out), those who stay take about eleven years to conclude the eight years of compulsory education. Rates of retention in first grade are still high: only 51 percent of the students are promoted, and of those, 44 percent have already repeated the grade (INEP/MEC, 1997).

Our previous studies have shown a clear relationship between poverty level and school performance. In general, the lower the socio-economic conditions of the region, the lower the rate of access to school and the worse the overall school performance (rate of promotion and drop-out); the poorer the student, the lower his/her performance and the higher the probability of failure (Gama, Jesus, Doxsey, Carvalho, Lucas, Salviato & Gonçalves, 1984).

This scenario is consistent with the explanations of the critical reproductionist theories that place the causality of educational problems in the socio-economic system and the associated

conditions of living of the children. Thus, the educational system serves to reproduce the social structure and to maintain the status quo. Children from the lower socio-income levels come to the public schools without the necessary readiness for learning. The schools in turn are precariously equipped and the teachers are poorly paid and poorly trained. Therefore the quality of the education provided is also poor and fails to give the student the necessary skills and academic competence to succeed in school in the work world. Students are pushed to drop out and to take premature work. The reproductive cycle is thus completed.

One can also explain this situation with the theories of cultural deprivation or deficit. Though lacking the organized framework of a theory, the body of research in the psychology of poverty reveals a metatheoretical framework which assumes that poverty also means less psychological readiness for learning and achieving. It was developed in the sixties and seventies by American educational psychology to explain social inequalities in schooling in the United States. Given the social conditions in Brazil, this line of investigation became quite popular in graduate programs in education and psychology in Brasil in the seventies and eighties and consequently have also influenced teacher training programs.

Despite the apparently convincing relationship between poverty and achievement we choose the critical theories. Even though the educational phenomena can only be understood through its social determinants, the schooling experience serves as a mediator between the concrete conditions of origin of the students and their social destiny. The contradictory relationship between reproduction and transformation are made concrete in the school, by the school. The quality of the schooling experience determines if this mediation is towards reproduction or negation of condition of origin.

Once our statistical data showed the positive relationship between poverty and school

performance our search for causal explanation focused on the public school teachers. We wanted to find out how they explained school failure --- were they influenced by one or other theoretical framework? Within the schools, teachers are the main mediators between conditions of origin and social destination of the students, therefore our interest. Several studies were conducted in different times and with different samples. Below we will attempt to summarize them as a support for our discussion on social representations of teachers.

Our Investigations and the Findings

Study 1. This investigation was conducted with 451 elementary public school teachers. They worked with grades one through four. Their schools were situated in six different counties, each one from one of the six regions in which the State had been divided for purposes of the larger evaluation study that we were conducting. About half of them worked in the rural area and half worked with one classroom schools, often teaching grades one through four simultaneously.

The data was collected in the main city of the county where they worked and involved two procedures: a qualitative focus discussion and a quantitative questionnaire. For the focus discussion they were at first presented statistics showing the performance of their county in terms of school enrollment, drop-out and promotion rates. The performance of the public schools was compared with the average of the state and with the private schools. Next, they participated on a discussion about the determinants of school failure and drop out in their schools. Their opinions were recorded and later content analyzed by six judges, by county first, and then summarized for the whole sample.

The information collected from the discussion with the teachers revealed wide similarity between the six different sub-samples. Five categories of determinants were identified, each one with several different but related themes. These categories were: philosophical and political assumptions

that underlie the practice of education, economic factors, socio-psychological factors, intra-school factors and extra-school factors related to the support of education. In all the six counties the categories that generated more consensus and higher emphasis as the aspects that most contributed to school failure were the socio-psychological factors regarding the student and the economic factors related to the conditions of poverty of the family. These included the following themes:

a) Social-psychological factors

- Lack of parental interest in the child's school work and achievement;
- Social-psychological problems of the child (lack of motivation and effort, apathy, lack of readiness to learn).
- Family relationship problems.

b) Economic factors

- Problems related to the indirect costs of education.
- Problems related to the direct costs of education.
- Paternal mobility (migration).
- Economic problems leading to nutrition and health problems of the child.
- Work schedule of parents.

This study is reported in Gama, Lucas, Salviato, Jesus, Carvalho and Doxsey (1991).

Part two of Study One was quantitative and initially had the purpose to triangulate the information obtained by means of the focus group. The teachers were presented a questionnaire with two lists with 16 options each related to possible determinants of school failure and success. These included: school conditions, technical-methodological conditions, teacher-student relationship, student characteristics and family characteristics. They were asked to choose up to five of the most

important causes of failure and of success. The results of this part of the study, as well as the subsequent investigations with samples two and three below, are reported in Gama & Jesus (1994).

Study 2. The sample was composed of 28 teachers from the two public schools chosen to participate on a larger study about student achievement and reported somewhere else. They worked in grades 1, 3 and 5 and responded to the same attribution questionnaire described in Study 1.

Study 3. The sample had 907 preschool teachers (99.2% of the public preschool teacher population). They responded to the same attribution questionnaire as described above.

Statistical analysis of the questionnaire data revealed similar results among the three groups of teachers in terms of their attributions of school success or failure. In all cases they exempted themselves from any share of responsibility for school failure and blamed the children and their families. On the other hand, they did see their skills as two of the main causes of student success. Overall, these were the most common causes of school success:

- . The family's interest in the child's school work;
- . The teachers' good teaching skills;
- . The students' effort
- . The teachers' good relationship skills.

The most commonly chosen causes of failure were:

- . The poor socio-economic conditions of the family;
- . The family's lack of interest in the students' school work;
- . The students' lack of personal effort.

The evidence revealed in the three studies showed surprisingly consistent results among the three different sample. Other investigations conducted in Brazil have also yielded similar results. For

instance the work of Mello (1982) in São Paulo is important to mention. Working with a sample of 564 elementary public school teachers, she investigated among other things, their opinions and perceptions about the school failure of children from underprivileged families. Her questionnaire listed twelve possible causes of school failure: six school-specific and six non-school related. Subjects scored each one (from 1 to 4) according to its importance (as related to the other eleven options) in the production of school failure among underprivileged children. The results allowed the grouping of the options in three groups:

1. Responsibility of the victim (the student)
2. Responsibility of poverty and lack of interest of the family
3. Responsibility of the school

The first two sets of causal options had the highest scores. Even though the teachers knew well the precarious conditions of their schools and new little about the living conditions of the children and their families they chose to blame the victims and their families for their school failure. Even though the schools are important part of the concrete living conditions of the children, the teachers chose to attribute less importance to their role in the production of failure. She concluded:

(...)the explanations about school failure of the economically deprived children privilege the causality expressed in psychological or cultural characteristics of these children or in family and cultural conditions that supposedly were in the origin of those characteristics (p.116).

More recently, a national evaluation of the public elementary schools in Brazil also showed similar results (Pilati, 1994). A large majority of the total of 3,111 principals "attributed the causality of school failure to factors that are external to the schools, such as the poverty of the population, the lack of support from the families of the students" (p. 21). Furthermore, a total of 17,814 teachers

"place the cause of school failure in factors of predominantly extra-school character, exempting themselves from the responsibility of the problem (p.22).

The Search for Theoretical Explanations

Although the above studies were conducted in different years, with different samples and using a variety of methods, the similarity among the findings in our studies as well as the studies of other investigators were such that the authors looked for theoretical explanations in the literature. It seemed to us that the teachers' attributions were not individual cognitions but collectively shared. As a group, they apparently had developed their own theory to explain this problem that is so common in the Brazilian schools.

How can we explain such generalized and socially shared beliefs? The concept of opinion or perception seem to be too static, too descriptive and based on cognitive processing which happens within the individual. It did not help us understand the issue. Attribution theory and research seemed a promising approach to understand causal judgements, but that too has been criticized for its strict psychological orientation (e.g. Feather, 1983, Hewstone, 1989, Moscovici, 1982). Hewstone brings up the issue of the genesis of attributions "the rather neglected question of where attributions come from" (p. 205). He talks about social or societal attributions and argues for a more social and cultural approach to its understanding. And he concludes:

The fact that attributions appear to be culturally and sub-culturally shared suggests the examination of wider social beliefs as bodies of knowledge that provide the basis, even the vocabulary, for social attributions. There are various constructs with which one could attempt an analysis of this knowledge --- ideology, attitudes, beliefs and so on. I prefer the concept of social representations as a genuinely societal knowledge structure that can further

our understanding of common-sense causal explanations (p. 205).

We too concluded that the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1984) was the most adequate theoretical framework to understand how teachers' causal explanations are created and how they influence their behavior. According to the theory social representations are not opinions or attitudes about certain situations, but a system of ideas, theories and body of knowledge socially shared by certain groups. They arise from the need to understand and explain situations. Social representations are different from other similar constructs because they do not refer only to a mental representation of something. It is central to the concept the idea that they are a construction, a re-elaboration of specialized knowledge which is then 're-presented'. Theories, science and knowledge are re-elaborated and transformed in common sense "theories". Moscovici considers commonsense as basic to all social representations, actually he has stated that social representations are "the contemporary version of common sense" (1981, p. 181).

In the case of the teachers, the pedagogical and psychological theories about students, instruction and learning have been re-elaborated and come to constitute a new set of ideas and ways to understand and to explain school reality. Moscovici explains that the social representations that we have about something are not directly related to our way of thinking, on the contrary ... our way of thinking and what we think depend of such representation. The results of our investigations and other studies suggest that Brazilian public school teachers have created their own "theory" about student achievement in the light of their experiences in the public school system and their need to explain the failure of the system to keep the students in the schools and to help them succeed. These representations seem to have been constructed upon some of the misconceptions about low income children and families which were generated with the research based on the psychology of poverty and

its associated assumptions about cultural deprivation. It is quite possible that the critical reproductivist theories and their emphasis on social class limitations also influence the elaboration of their social representations. Even though teachers are far more familiar with the precariousness of the school systems and of their own training than the living conditions of the student their social representations serve as frame of references to explain and classify student behavior.

Once established, social representations guide everyday thinking and behavior and consequently teachers' expectations and attributions about student achievement, thus serving the purpose to perpetuate the pattern of low achievement and high failure among low income children who attend the public schools in Brazil. By blaming the student and his/her family for a failure that really is not theirs but rather of living and educational conditions that are not conducive to good learning, they end up reinforcing the reproductive role of the schools and making transformation unlikely.

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